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Music

A DOCUMENT OF L.A. PUNK IN TRANSITION

by Bruce D. Rhodewalt

The Decline of Western Civilization, recently released by Slash Records, is the original soundtrack of Penelope Spheeris' upcoming documentary of the L.A. punk scene in early 1980. In its own right, the record is a legitimate document of a middle phase between the infamous Masque days and today's riotous events.

Keep in mind, this is *punk* we're talking about, not the nebulous and euphemistic "new wave." As Claude Bessy a.k.a. Kickboy Face says on the record, "There's new music, there's new underground sound, there's noise, there's power pop, there's ska, there's rockabilly, but new wave doesn't mean shit." You will find no Naughty Sweeties or Heaters on this album — no power pop, ska, or rockabilly. The bands — Alice Bag Band (The Bags minus Pat, who took the name with her), Black Flag, Catholic Discipline, Circle Jerks, Fear, Germs and X — are a fair sampling of the old and the new, the smart and the stupid of early-1980 L.A. punk. (Noticeably missing from the list of still active veterans are the Alley Cats. Too bad; I would like to have heard "Too Much Junk" or "Gimme a Little Pain," maybe instead of one of the four Circle Jerks songs.)

The songs, 15 in all, are separated from each other with interview quotes from Bessy, Exene and other principals, as well as various fans. The editing is brisk and quick, matching the pace of the music. And the sound quality — especially for nightclub performances of punk music — is generally excellent, although Slash is still in no danger of competing with the biggies for pressing quality. (My copy has pops and one of Slash's typical noisy run-out grooves.)

But even more important, the music has all the excitement it should. John Doe plays some real sharp bass in "Johny Hit and Run Paulene"; "Beyond and Back" reveals Billy Zoom's rockabilly roots better than any other recording of X; the vocals in Fear's "I Don't Care About You" are, especially in the chorus, right on the mark — they ring and keep the song moving at a thrilling pace. And Darby Crash's growling vocal style in the Germs' "Manimal" is wild and disturbing.

The album begins with Eugene, a fan, explaining why "punk rock" is just rock 'n' roll: "It's like it's raw again, and it's for real, and it's fun." Then the musicians read the consent announcement ("Please be advised that by your entry upon these premises you are consenting to being photographed. . ."), which is cut so that each section is read several times, by one performer after another. Each star gets to show off a little: Phranc of Catholic Discipline shouts. Lee Ving of Fear plays a Nazi sergeant, Darby mumbles, and these candid moments, spaced throughout the record, are the best part, the most revealing.

To prove how rebellious they are, fans say things like, "I hate cops to the max," "I'm a total rebel, I, I rebel against everything," and hurl verbal abuse at the bands (especially Fear, who encourage it). Bessy (of Catholic Discipline, and *Slash* magazine founder) talks about writing "Underground Babylon" after cleaning up on Monday mornings at the Masque. Nicole Oliveri, manager of the Germs, explains how they didn't get booked anymore because the newer (meaning "new wave") bands were content to do what the Germs didn't: "a sedate, safe stage show." And punk guru Darby Crash recites the perfect Darbyism: "Dammit! Will one o' you gimme a beah?"

The album is also an authentic document of L.A. punk in transition. It captures the change in attitude, or at least in severity of attitude, from the early days to now. Alice Bag sings in "Gluttony," "A nice pot roast just dropped in dressed in clogs. . ." After that bit of wit, Fear proudly berates the audience, singing, "I don't care about you." The self-conscious sublimity of the bands associated with the early punk scene, such as X ("We're desperate, get used to it"), Catholic Discipline ("All the prophets have died/ The books have been written"), and the Germs ("I came into this world like a puzzled panther/ Waiting to be caged/ But something stood in the way/ I was never quite tamed") is certainly a common thread running through all punk and even all rock 'n' roll. But those naive apocalyptic visions seem, at worst, quaint when compared to Black Flag's apparent racism ("Gonna be a white minority/ All the rest will be the majority/ Gonna breed inferiority/ . . . White pride you're an American/ I'm gonna hide anywhere I can") and today's swastika armbands.

Maybe distance lends objectivity and makes the earlier punk stance only *appear* to be more in fun, but the newer punk bands on *The Decline* do seem more serious about their attitudes. Somehow when X says, "We're desperate," it doesn't seem nearly as dangerous as Black Flag saying (to the LAPD, who have a habit of attending Black Flag events), "Revenge! I'll watch you bleed/ Revenge! That's all I need."

With the swastika, today's fans have come up with the ultimate symbol of rebellion against the World War II generation. True, it is nowhere near a universal punk symbol, but it is strong enough, even to the older punks such as Phranc (who sings a folk song reminding the would-be Nazis that "fascism isn't anarchy"), to make even a small group of youths wearing bandanas, boots and swastikas look like a neo-Nazi rally.

The current post-*Slash* magazine, post-Hong Kong Cafe and post-Darby Crash phase of punk will probably be well-documented, judging by the local press' fascination with "punk riots." Unfortunately, the days of the Masque will not fare so well, since no films and very few sound recordings exist. *The Decline of Western Civilization* is important, therefore, as a record of the transitional period between the two — showing fairly accurately where the movement had been and where it was headed.

Actually, the motivations for 1977 punk and 1981 punk are about the same: alienation and desperation. Exene says in *The Decline* that she knows, with X's imminent success, that she will feel a little funny singing about being desperate when people are paying $6 to see them. But, she says, "there's worse ways of being desperate than being poor." There's the desperation of suffocating suburban comfort, of confusion about one's role in a group of peers who demand individualism and conformity at the same time, of being only 16 and already fed up with everything the world has to offer.

If the mass of men really do lead lives of quiet desperation, then the human subjects studied in *The Decline* soundtrack are no different from any other group of people, except that their desperation hasn't been so quiet. ■

by Pleasant Gehman

The big news of the week is that the **VEX** opening was a smash, to put it mildly. The show started a little late, due to a few minor problems with the P.A., but once underway it really swung. **TOP JIMMY** and the **CHEIFS** played a hand of seven card No-Peek poker to see who opened, and Top Jimmy, usually a card-shark extraordinaire, lost. The Vex is definitely going to be a strong club. Check it out.

The **PLIMSOULS** threw a huge gala playback party show off their new album on Planet Records at Heider recording studios on Sunset. Around the room were gigantic bouquets of Plimsouls balloons The album — surprise! surprise! — sounds almost exactly the way the Plimsouls do live. The only drawback to the evening was that you couldn't get a copy of the record. The party moved to **CATHAY DE GRANDE** at about ten o'clock, where **PETER CASE** was supposed to do a solo performance but didn't. **FALCON DANNY BENAIR** spun discs instead.

Speaking of the Grande, **JAN BALLARD**, ex of **MADAME WONG'S** is booking there now, and the Grande is going to be having shows about three times a week. This Thursday, the "Thirsty Thursday Club" will present **LEVI DEXTER & THE RIP CHORDS**, crazy rockabilly. Thursdays will be given over to rockabilly or R&B, Tuesdays and Wednesdays will be solo performances by local well-knowns. Call for info. The best part is that if you come before 8 p.m., you get in free.

HILARY STENCIL, ex of **PEARL HARBOR AND THE EXPLOSIONS**, has joined the San Francisco combo the **VISITORS**.

The **CRAMPS** album, which I will definitely keep you posted on, is going to be called *Psychedelic Jungle* and will be released in late March (an agonizing wait, but worth it).

LYDIA LUNCH, of **TEENAGE JESUS, EIGHT-EYED SPY** and **DEVIL DOG** fame (the woman's had a checkered career, and she's barely even old enough to drink!), has moved out here and is forming a new band called **ELECTRIC WRECK**. In Ms. Lunch's own words, Electric Wreck will be "Hypnotic, brutal, simply psychedelic and ridiculous." Anyway, they're looking for a bass player, and if you're interested, call 876-1893.

To close on a slightly silly note, **HOWARD PAAR** and the **BOXBOYS** are starting a petition to put *Get Smart* back on the air. You can sign up for it at the **O.N. KLUB**. Now, what about *Dobie Gillis*?

Stop the press! Stay tuned for an evening of folksy excitement at the Whisky, February 22. **TITO LARRIVA** of the **PLUGZ** will do a whole set of Mexican folk songs, **GEZA X** will play an acoustic set, the **SATIN TONES** will play with special guest stars, and there will be appearances by **PHRANC, CHARLOTTE CAFFREY, JEFFERY LEA** and more. ■

L.A.'s Top 30

(Compiled specifically for the *L.A. Weekly* by **Musicvision** under the supervision of Lenny Beer. The *L.A. Weekly* chart is based on actual sales reports from the major record chains in L.A., the only such chart available.)

Position	Last Week	
1		***Paradise Theater*** Styx (A&M)
2		***Double Fantasy*** John Lennon/Yoko Ono (Geffen)
3		***Zenyatta Mondatta**** Police (A&M)
4		***The Jazz Singer*** Neil Diamond (Capitol)
•5		***High Infidelity*** REO Speedwagon (Epic)
6		***Greatest Hits*** Kenny Rogers (Liberty)
7		***Crimes of Passion*** Pat Benatar (Chrysalis)
8		***Back in Black*** AC/DC (Atlantic)
9		***Gaucho*** Steely Dan (MCA)
10		***Guilty*** Barbra Streisand (Columbia)
11		***Autoamerican**** Blondie (Chrysalis)
•12		***Gap Band III*** Gap Band (Mercury)
•13		***Trust**** Elkie Costello (Columbia)
14		***Foolish Behavior*** Rod Stewart (WB)
15		***Hotter Than July*** Stevie Wonder (Tamla)
•16		***Two of Us*** Yarbrough and Peoples (Mercury)
•17		***Turn Back*** Toto (Columbia)
18		***Christopher Cross*** Christopher Cross (WB)
•19		***The Turn of a Friendly Card*** Alan Parsons Project (Arista)
•20		***Horizon*** Eddie Rabbitt (Elektra)
•21		***Sandinista!**** Clash (Epic)
22		***9 to 5*** Dolly Parton (MCA)
23		***Imagination*** Whispers (Solar)
•24		***Captured*** Journey (Columbia)
25		***Eagles Live*** Eagles (Asylum)
26		***Celebration*** Kool & the Gang (De-Lite)
27		***Fantastic Voyage*** Lakeside (RCA)
28		***The River*** Bruce Springsteen (Columbia)
29		***City Nights*** Terry Bradshaw (WB)
30		***Touch*** Con Funk Shun (Mercury)

Soon to hit the charts:
Ghost Riders in the Sky
Outlaws (Arista)

Evangeline
Emmylou Harris (Reprise)

• A bullet before the title indicates a strong upward surge in sales and upward movement in the charts.
* An asterisk after the title denotes a New Wave album

New Wave Chart

The following are the best-selling New Wave records in the L.A. area *other than* those LPs which have made the Top 30 chart. (Compiled by the *L.A. Weekly* staff.)

1. ***The Unclaimed*** (45) Undefined (Moxie)
2. ***Kings of the Wild Frontier*** (LP) Adam & the Ants (Epic)
3. ***Sound Affects*** (LP) Jam (Polydor)
4. ***The Brat*** (45) Brat (Risk)
5. ***Jealous Again*** (EP) Black Flag (SST)
6. ***Wall of Voodoo*** (EP) Wall of Voodoo (IRS)
7. ***Wippo*** (EP) Wippo (Man Made)
8. ***We Got the Beat*** (45) Go Go's (Stiff)
9. ***White Girl*** (45) X (Slash)
10. ***Decline of Western Civilization*** (LP) Various artists (Slash)

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